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ABSTRACT

The National Center for the Study of Corporal Punishment and Alternatives in the Schools, established the Discipline Helpline to guide parents in handling specific discipline problems. To evaluate the telephone counseling service, 63 persons who had contacted the Helpline for assistance with specific discipline problems completed the Helpline Effectiveness Rating Scale, a ten-item scale focusing on the effectiveness of the counselor, the process involved, and the usefulness of the service. The results from this participant evaluation indicated that over 90 percent of respondents felt the counselors were empathetic and 89 percent understood the suggestions presented to them by the counselors. These findings support the counselors' effectiveness in establishing rapport with the callers. The majority of respondents (88.3 percent) considered the Discipline Helpline a useful service; 92 percent reported that they would call the Helpline in the future. These results suggest that telephone counseling can provide inexpensive yet high-quality guidance in helping parents learn to discipline. (NRB)

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Evaluation of the Discipline Helpline

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Paper presented at the Annual Convention for the National Association for School Psychologists. Philadelphia, PA. April 19, 1984.

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Psychologists are caught in a double bind. At no other time has the need for psychological services been greater yet the number of funded positions been more limited. In fact, experts (Albee, 1982) have predicted that there will never be enough professionals available to provide services, and that the gap between need and availability will continue to widen as the public recognizes the necessity for such services. It has become evident, therefore, that alternative forms of service which focus on prevention and consultation must be implemented.

Discipline represents one such area in which the need for service to parents exceeds the time schedules of most psychologists. Many parents have questions about discipline alternatives, age-appropriate behaviors and communication techniques. Few, however, have the knowledge, resources or professional guidance. Instead, they consult "how to discipline" books or personal friends for advice. Many parents become frustrated in searching for answers and revert to ineffective discipline techniques, such as corporal punishment.

The National Center for the Study of Corporal Punishment and Alternatives in the Schools has recognized the need to guide parents in handling specific discipline problems and, in response, has established the Discipline Helpline. This service, which began operation in December, 1982, has responded to more than 100 callers to date and continues to operate using trained professionals as telephone counselors. The steady influx of calls seems to indicate the Helpline's effectiveness. The first

formal evaluation of the service, however, is reported in this paper.

Evaluation of telephone counseling services may take many forms. Suchman (1967) lists five criteria by which a program may be judged. Included in these are:

(1) Effort - what is the quantity and quality of the service that takes place?

(2) Performance - do people receive help from telephone counseling?

(3) Adequacy of performance - is the performance of the service sufficient to cope with the community need?

(4) Efficiency - could the service provided by the telephone counseling agency be better provided by a different kind of agency or service?

(5) Process - how are the results of the service produced?

Lester (1976) acknowledges that very little research to date has attempted to consider any of these criteria in evaluation of telephone counseling services.

A number of telephone counseling services, however, have evaluated their performances by focusing on low-level objectives concerned with the internal operation of the agency, administrative functions and performance of the counselors. Lester (1970) measured the length of time required to obtain telephone counseling. In doing so, he identified peak periods of activity and monitored the performance of its counselors. Other

centers ask counselors to rate the improvement of callers based on telephone contact and/or assess the completeness with which caller records are kept.

A separate but crucial area for evaluation is the adequacy of counseling provided by staff. Fowler and Mc Gee (1976) developed a technical effectiveness scale which focuses upon technical aspects of the counselor's performances. Williamson et al. (1976) used simulated client calls in which actors call the counselors and role play a specific problem situation. The response of the counselor is then evaluated. Other methods of evaluation involve taping calls or raters listening in on calls. Most evaluation techniques have involved crisis center/suicide prevention services with little involvement of other types of service.

The purpose of this study is two-fold. Primarily, it will serve to describe the Discipline Helpline program and report its effectiveness in helping parents handle discipline problems. This will be accomplished by having previous Helpline callers rate the service. Secondly, the study presents an innovative method of evaluating telephone counseling services. This technique attempts to address some of the criteria proposed by Suchman (1967) as important in program evaluation. This is accomplished by contacting previous Discipline Helpline callers and asking them specific questions related to the performance, efficiency and process of the service. Results from the study will aid in developing the Helpline model.

Method

Subjects

Sixty-three persons who had orginally called the Helpline from December, 1982 to January, 1984 were contacted and agreed to participate in the evaluation. Callers had originally become aware of the Helpline through publicity from newspaper articles, radio announcements and word-of-mouth. The sample was similar in that all callers actively sought help with specific discipline problems.

Instrument

The Helpline Effectiveness Rating Scale (HERS) was developed to assess the efficacy of the service. Experts in discipline and survey research were consulted to assure content validity. In addition, items on the scale were re-phrased for maximum clarity after a 10-call trial evaluation was completed.

The survey consists of 10 questions which focus on the effectiveness of the counselor, the process involved and the usefulness of the service. Participants' responses involved Likert scale ratings as well as qualitative reporting.

Procedure

One school psychology graduate student, trained in using the HERS, completed the entire evaluation. Although she was interested in the work of the National Center, the evaluator never participated in any Helpline calls and was considered unbiased in reporting the responses of those callers involved in

the study.

Design

Five evaluation sessions took place, with the evaluator calling previous Helpline consultees and asking them to participate in the study. Callers were assurred that their responses and identifications would be held strictly confidential and results of the study would be used only for research purposes. Participants requesting further help with discipline problems were instructed to call the Helpline at a future time. Only evaluation data were discussed during these calls. Responses were then recorded and tabulated by the evaluator.

Results

Because the evaluation involved callers who had received service over a long period of time (December, 1982 to January, 1984), t-tests comparing ratings from early callers versus recent callers were performed. Results showed no significant differences in caller ratings of a) counselor understanding of problems (t=.714); b) callers' following counselor recommendations (t=.495) and c) usefulness of Helpline services (t=.282).

In regards to counselor's empathy, 60.3% of the participants felt the counselor understood the discipline situation extremely well while 30.2% felt the telephone worker recognized the problem well. Similarly, 50% of the callers rated the counselor's recommendations as extremely clear to them while 38.7% viewed their suggestions as very clear. Only 4.8% considered the

recommendations to be totally unclear.

Measures of the Helpline's effectiveness and usefulness were also made. Seventy-two percent of those polled reported that they follwed at least some of the counselor's recommendations, 35.5% felt the suggestions were extremely effective while 40.3% rated them very effective. Only 11.3% felt that the recommendations they tried were totally unsuccessful. For those who did not follow any of the counselor's suggestions, 46% decided that the recommendations would not work before they attempted to implement them.

Recommendations were grouped into one of four categories which included behavioral techniques, communication skills, ecological methods or outside referrals. Thirty-four percent of those polled were able to recount a specific recommendation given them by the counselor while 25% could not recall a specific suggestion. Twenty-two percent reported that the best feature of the Helpline was the chance to talk to a professional and/or be reassurred by the counselor. The majority of callers (82%) were given specific types of recommendations with only 18% receiving outside referral sources. Of those to whom outside referrals were made, 45.5% had made contact and had already had at least one appointment.

Finally, 88.3% of those polled felt the Discipline Helpline was a useful service and 92% reported that they would call the Helpline in the future.

Discussion

Results from this evaluation of the Discipline Helpline indicate that over 90% of those evaluated felt the counselor was empathetic and 89% understood the suggestions presented to them by the counselors. These findings support the counselors' effectiveness in establishing rapport with the callers, a quality important in affecting change (Carkhuff, 1969).

The process involved in the Helpline counseling situation was examined by asking the rater to recall specific discipline suggestions. It was felt that this would reflect the meaning and worth of the Helpline counseling situation. Findings show that a modest amount of callers could recall particular recommendations, but considering that a equal number felt that the best feature of the Helpline was having someone listen to them, one realizes the effectiveness of the counseling process. In addition, it appears that parents need more than direct "how to" suggestions as provided by popular books. Rather, equally important, is the availability of a knowledgeable individual who will listen and understand the frustration of today's parents.

The efficacy of the service is supported by the overwhelming porcentage of callers who reported that the Helpline is a useful service and one that they would use again. This findings suggest that telephone counseling can be implemented to provide inexpensive yet high-quality guidance in helping parents learn to discipline. In addition, the effects of the program may be generalized so that parents can apply advice they have been given

from Helpline counselors to future discipline situations. By teaching techniques to parents, professionals are actually engaged in prevention.

Finally, in terms of telephone counseling evaluation, this study suggests that researchers can investigate the processes, efficacy and usefulness of such services. This involves follow-up methods of re-contacting callers. Although this technique requires the counselor to initially collect some caller identification (first name) and phone number, it does provide a viable alternative to taping entire calls. This method may not be suitable to crisis intervention services where callers resist recognition but offers alternative, low-cost evaluation procedures for other telephone counseling services. Furthermore, it reiterates that evaluation can be accomplished in many ways and includes many types of measures, all of which help develop telephone counseling.

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